

B3 - Chapter 3 - Letters

Sara walked into the office of the apothecary in charge of Daniel's care. Her name was Renti, and she was a woman around sixty with graying hair and gentle features as she ground dried mana herbs in a green mortar.

"Just a minute," Renti said gently. "This beauty's fragile. Here, come watch. If you hurry, you'll see something amazing."

Sara was surprised by her casualness but sat down. In the mortar, there was a silver plant, and as she ground it, it created this small cloud of gas that remained at the bottom of the mortar, making it impossible to see the plant she was grinding. It was as if she were God, grinding the world from the clouds. "What is this?" she asked.

"Ah, nothing important." Renti smiled gently and turned to Sara. "It's called Elsha Root, and it's pretty worthless. But..." she whipped her finger and raised it, and the silver cloud turned into a tornado that radiated a silver glow. It was captivating, sucking in Sara's full attention. "It's a marvel," Renti said.

"That's it?" Sara asked.

"I wish." Renti smiled and grabbed a golden tincture out of a drawer. "One day I'll experiment for the love again. But for now...." She unscrewed the lid and used the dropper to put a drop into the mortar. Once she did, the silver dust above the mortar sucked downward like iron sucking to a magnet, and it glowed with ambient golden light. "I'm making cosmetics."

"Cosmetics...." Sara repeated with a sardonic grin.

Renti shrugged. "Kids have ambitions."

"Your kids aren't grown?"

"They are—but it doesn't mean I can't spoil them."

Sara nodded and then shook her head, unsure whether to agree or disagree, laugh or stay silent.

Renti scrapped the paste into a small balm jar and sealed it with a spell. Then she turned to Sara. "What brought 'cha here?"

Sara felt her ribs drop an inch, taking her smile with it. She took a deep breath. "Lord Winters. How is he?"

Renti's smile disappeared, and she looked at the jar of cosmetics she successfully made—a strict contrast to the look of failure in her eyes. "I know you're all hopeful, but...." She took a sharp breath and shook her head. "It'd take a miracle... *miracles* to help him get out of this."

Sara put her best *disappointed* face on. "I see.... If he were to wake up, how long do you think it'd take for him to walk?"

"With resources... a few months? It'd take weeks just to sit up."

"It's that bad?"

"He hasn't eaten anything in two years. He hasn't moved.... Would you like to see him?"

Sara shook her head. "No. But could you check in on him tonight and let me know his condition tomorrow? I'm going on a trip for a couple weeks, and I wanna keep tabs on him."

"I can, but it'll have to wait until six."

"That's perfect. Thank you." Sara got up and pulled out a Golden Griffin and put it on the table. "For the love." She walked out of the room as Renti *weakly* protested.

2

Sara had time, so she returned to her room, where she sat at her desk and activated the spatial ring that she had on her ring finger. She reached into the cool cave she had put both the endpoints in (so two rings could share the space) and fondled nervously around for an envelope, praying that today wouldn't be the day that Kyritus and Tiber stopped writing—

—it wasn't. Sara's heart fluttered when she felt two envelopes, and she pulled them out slowly. They were simple white envelopes that had custom wax stamps (she had made for them) that had the Trelle character equivalents of "K" and "T." The one from the K made a shifting sound that made her nervous, but the wax wasn't double-pressed (the sign of duress they agreed on), so she followed her routine, heating the wax on the envelope with the "T" to get *the truth*.

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Guess what, Delina! Kye and I went jewelry shopping today. He said it was for me, but we spent nooooooooooooo time looking at what *I wanted*. "Yeah, that looks nice," he'd say and then go back to looking at jewelry twice my size! Well guess what? That was rude! So brother's asked for this: KYE WENT SHOPPING FOR YOU TODAY! Make sure to tell him I told you and *why*. Rude.

You know what the worst part is? It was soooooooooooooo cute. I was almost jealous. When I was sick, it was always Tiber this, Tiber that. Now I'm working doubles so Kye can write you. If I didn't love you, I'd call him out.

Oh, by the way, he only spent money from the tavern. He still feels like a bum that he's still in debt to you. I'm annoyed, but gotta give him credit.

Anyway, I gotta get back to serving these richies. Muuuuuuuuuuuah!

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Sara's heart was pounding as she looked at the other envelope. She picked it up like a present and shook it. There was a shift again, the snakey sound of a chain. Once she confirmed, she wished that she had read Kyritus's letter instead of cheating by getting the blunt translation from Tiber first. Yet she was still nervous as she heated the wax, opened the envelope, and pulled out the letter, ignoring what was inside as if it were a present. Then she read:

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I never thought I'd miss cleaning broken glass off the floor, but... Emanasa forgive.... I'm not complaining... okay, I'm complaining a little, but not about our situation.... I wish that ink was cheaper so I could just start over, but SURPRISE! I'm still living like a broke kid with a sick sister. But hey, you're stuck with it. Oh yeah, complaining.... Forget it. I'm over it.

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Sara laughed.

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Okay, onto the good stuff. Last night, I was singing a song, getting told that I should hire some strings to make it "official," wishing that a group of ruffians with mugs of twalla and a death wish would show them what "official" meant when I got a tip 50 silver tip and thought, "What's the point of money if I don't use it for things that matter?" So I thought about it and realized that I have everything that I wanted a few years ago. But there's one thing that I want more than anything.... So I thought I'd tell *her* with a gift.

I hope you like it. You're pretty simple, so I tried to get something that you'd want to wear daily.

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Sara's eyes welled with tears of joy when she saw the thin silver chain without a pendant. It was perfect—mostly. "I can't wear this," Sara chuckled, tears streaking down her cheeks. "So much for an adventurer tender.... Wait." Sara's eyes widened, and she burst into laughter when she saw the next line.

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That way, you'll stop adventuring.

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Necklaces got caught on everything. Armor. Vines. Tree limbs. And while she wasn't worried about it choking her (like normal people), she was afraid that it'd catch and break. That's why rings were the best jewelry for fighting, followed by skin-tight bracelets. Kyritus knew that as someone who ran an adventurer's tavern—but bought it anyway as a way of telling her to settle down and stay safe. Sara grabbed the necklace, letting the cool metal slide through her fingers before she finished reading.

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I feel presumptuous to say all this, but I think we've long past that. Listen... I know I'm not a king or Agronus or... important. But I'm getting damn good at Stralla cooking, and we'd... I'd love to see you soon. Another year? Two? It'd be easier if we knew, but... hey. I'll wait forever. Just don't die on me, okay?

Love you, Kye

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Sara felt like someone put her heart in a wrench and tightened it. Not at the love you (they had written daily for the last nine months and were dating —at least on

the nights she allowed herself to believe it). The thing that got her was the waiting. She kept waiting—praying—for Daniel to die—and he hadn't. Edico had spared no resource in keeping his savior alive against all rhyme and reason. But Sara couldn't live with that. Not after what happened. Not with what was at stake.

She picked up her pen and dipped it into the inkwell.

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I'm already dreaming of the day I can wear it daily. Until then, I'll be wearing it in the city and in my ring if I'm traveling. Which pretty much means that I'll wear it every day. If you think you're tired of dealing with boring rich people, get into politics.

Seriously though... I cherish it. And don't give me this "presumptuous" shit. I asked you to marry me the instant I met you (something you never let me forget). I still want to. And trust me—if there's anyone that can make Jeskel snake taste edible, it's you. But there's nothing like a bowl of reska with fresh bread, and there's no way I'm living in Telsenlore, so I look forward to the day when I can rescue you from that lucrative hellhole and wear that necklace forever.

As for when

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Sara paused on "when"—unsure what to say. That would depend on what happened that night.

Instead of finishing it, she folded the letter and put it into the envelope for later. Then, she carefully melted the wax back on Kyritus and Tiber's letters before putting them into a safe within her personal spatial ring—so she could keep and cherish them forever.

Once she finished her routine, she sat down, staring at the ceiling, feeling darkness clashing with her positive emotions. Daniel was necrotic poison for the healing soul—and she wondered if that'd be permanent after that night. Sara closed her eyes and started chanting. Her body dissolved into an invisible film that she had almost perfected. Then she stood and silently moved out the door like a wraith seeking revenge.

3

Sara posted outside Daniel's room, watching the two guards trying not to nod off. It was brutal work—standing there for eight hours, doing nothing. That was torture of the highest degree—and she imagined that it was doled out as a punishment.

After all—only Raul and Emma knew Daniel was in danger.

Everyone else thought she posted guards in front of his room to protect him—not trap him inside. She had everyone fooled, so if she was going to kill him, no one would suspect her as long as he died peacefully.

As promised, Renti approached the guards at six, addressing them by name. They saluted her and welcomed her in. Then, as expected from an older woman set in her ways, Renti (as always) said, "It's so stuffy! It's as if they're trying to kill you,"

as she unlocked the window. Satisfied, Sara glided through the halls like a ghost, reaching the nearest balcony—and jumping. She landed, of course, stranded in mid-air on an invisible barrier of raw mana. Not a barrier spell—a block of solid mana. Then, as effortlessly as Emma, she walked on air all the way up to the window where Daniel lay dormant. From there, she'd put a stopper in the window, giving her access once Renti left. Yet she froze when she heard Renti speaking through the cracked window.

"They're asking about you again. General Sullsburg. Lady Cole. Martinez. Even Lady Reece's askin'...."

Sara's heart pounded as she listened, unsure whether Renti was talking to a coma patient or a *conspiracy*.

"The whole damn kingdom's waiting for ya, kid. So don't keep 'em waiting too long." Renti stood up, and Sara panicked, moving to the window and putting a square stone that was thinner than a pen onto the sill as Renti came to shut it. The apothecary moved fast that day, moving straight to the window, and for a moment, Sara found herself staring Renti in the eyes, three feet away. The world slowed down as it happened, and at that moment, Sara forgot that she was invisible, and she imagined that the woman was staring at her naked body—that's how vulnerable she felt. It was reasonable. No one made it to be a court apothecary without decades of experience in the highest tier, working with mana daily, attuned to slight fluctuations. Renti could know even if she couldn't see Sara, in the same way that Sara or Emma would be able to notice. So Sara's heart pounded uncontrollably, her body turning stiff a hundred feet off the ground. Then the world sped up again, and Renti sighed, shutting the window.

"What the?" Renti muttered when the window wouldn't lock. "Why won't you...." Sara slowly crouched, exiting her line of sight, and then held her breath. Renti opened the window again and looked around, searching for the blockage. Sara thought Renti would find it, look out the window, and sense her. It made her pulse thrum in her temples as she waited to see if she had to run and claim there was an assassination attempt later.

"These men don't care," Renti grumbled, giving up and walking away. Sara pressed her back against the wall where no one could see her and then listened. Renti and the guards spoke, and the guards said they'd warn the Castellan during the next shift change (as they couldn't leave). Then the apothecary left, and all went still.

Sara stood there for another 20 minutes, cultivating and circulating mana as she felt droves of mana leave her body to keep standing there. Once she was certain that the guards wouldn't check on Daniel or the window, she opened the window and slipped inside.

4

Saying Daniel was "skin and bones" was an understatement. Sara had once seen a picture of an Indian man who had raised his right arm in the air for almost fifty years to honor the Hindu God Shiva. He pulled it off, but his arm became skeletal to the point someone could see his bones—

—that’s what Daniel’s entire body looked like. Sara could see his cheekbones, and when she pulled back the covers (expecting Daniel to finally open his eyes in some grand conspiracy), she found his arms and legs no better. He looked like an embalmed cadaver on a mortician’s table, freshly sown back together for the funeral. It was hard to imagine that he could even sit in a wheelchair. If his bed wasn’t a wooden block with arrays engraved on it—emitting a faint glow from a healing ward—he wouldn’t be alive. Yet despite that—this was the person who tried to rob her. The person who almost got her and Emma and Raul killed. The person who was terrifying enough to turn back time—a foray into what she imagined was forbidden magic. Daniel Winters. The most terrifying person she knew, reduced to skin and bones, yet more terrifying than he was when he was walking somehow.

Sara took a deep breath and grabbed one of his pillows and held it over him.